DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 427 314 CS 216 574

AUTHOR Pelias, Ronald J.
TITLE Performative Writing as Scholarship: An Apology, an Argument, an Anecdote.
PUB DATE 1998-11-00
NOTE 21p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Communication Association (84th, New York, NY, November 21-24, 1998).
PUB TYPE Opinion Papers (120) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Essays; *Ethnography; *Faculty Publishing; Higher Education; Poetry; *Scholarship; *Writing Attitudes; *Writing for Publication; Writing Processes
IDENTIFIERS *Performative Language

ABSTRACT

This paper contains three parts. Part 1 consists of a poem, "An Apology for Performative Writing." Part 2, "The Traditional Scholar's Game--An Argument," discusses the arguments regarding performative writing. It identifies several key arguments both for and against the works that cluster around such labels as performative writing, autoethnography, performative essay, ethnodrama, personal ethnography, autoperformance, and ethnographic poetics; and uses the term "performative writing" to stand in for the many ongoing efforts for alternative modes of scholarly presentation. Part 3, "Performative Writing: A Personal Anecdote," gives the authors musings on performative writing. (Contains 4 notes and 25 references.) (CR)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 427 314

Performative Writing as Scholarship: An Apology, An Argument, An Anecdote

Ronald J. Pelias
Professor
Department of Speech Communication
Southern Illinois University
Carbondale, IL 62901

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

P. Pelias

1

Presented at National Communication Association Convention, November 1998

CS 216 574

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Part 1: An Apology for Performative Writing with Apologies to Marianne Moore

I, too, dislike it: there are things that tradition
just won't permit, things that must be
proven, things that are important beyond all this
human passion.
Reading it, however, with a perfect contempt for it,
with a complete comfort in one's
superiority, with a dismissive confidence
that only our accepted academic positions could certify,
one discovers
in it after all, a place where lifeless abstractions might find
human form, where the level of significance
might slide off the page on a tear, where categories
might crack and statistics shrink, and where reason is
unruly. One discovers in
it after all, a place for the genuine.
Eyes that can analyze beyond variance, ears
that can hear what others say, palms
that know the sweat of joining another
and of opening the fist. These things are
important not because a

high-sounding argument can be put around them but
because they are
useful: they evoke what seemed impossible to evoke, they say

what seemed unsayable.

When they become so derivative as to become

uncommitted,

the same thing may be said for all of us, that we

do not admire what

we cannot believe: the playing in pain

for quick results, the telling of tales

that point only to themselves, the sharing

for sheer

shock, or turning the stage into a

therapeutic session

or criticizing without so much as a

twitch, and all that ego, ego, ego,

ergo, nothing else--

nor is it valid

to discriminate against standard monographs and

quarterlies: all these phenomena are important. One

must make a distinction

however: when convention programs abound with half-hearted

or just too sincere performative writers

when journals feature easy confessions or calculated

controversy

the result is not performative writing

nor till the performative writers among us can be

scholars of

experience--above
self-absorption and triviality and can present

for identification: real lives that shake the imagination
connecting us to subjects that truly matter,
connecting us to each other
shall we have
it. In the meantime, if you demand on the one hand,
the raw data of life in
all its rawness and
that which is on the other hand
genuine, then you are interested in
performative writing.

Part 2: The Traditional Scholar's Game--An Argument

This section identifies several key arguments, both for and against, the works that cluster around such labels as performative writing, autoethnography, performative essay, ethnodrama, personal ethnography, autoperformance, and ethnographic poetics. The section uses the term "performative writing" to stand in for the many ongoing efforts for alternative modes of scholarly representation. It is necessary to note, however, that the work under these labels, while sharing many commonalties, cannot be reduced into a single logic. With that precaution in mind, the goal here is to make a case

for such works within the scholarly arena. In the end, the section shows what performative writing offers that more traditional forms of scholarly writing do not. Six claims are put forth for performative writing.

1. Performative writing expands the notions of what constitutes disciplinary knowledge. For some, that is just the problem. As Craig Gingrich-Philbrook points out in his discussion of masculinity, fear of losing disciplinary control over sanctioned forms and content triggers a talk of legitimacy. Those who have been designated to legislate what counts had better stay ever vigilant or the very foundation of the academic enterprise might crack, letting in all sorts of pollutants. This, it seems clear, is the sentiment behind Malcolm Parks' fearful claim, "No question is more central to our identity as scholars than the question of what counts as scholarship" (np).

1.1 Parks' fear cannot be easily dismissed but in the case of performative writing, it is misplaced. Performative writing is not the wrecking ball swinging into the master's house.

1.1.1 While most would acknowledge that scholarship is contingent upon historical, economic, ideological and disciplinary patterns, few are ready to reject the considerable body of scholarly work in the name of relativism. Every time a paper is graded, an article for a journal is reviewed, or a scholarly essay is written, scholars are reflecting and affirming what they value. To

argue contingency is not to argue for the utterly arbitrary: There are some good reasons for valuing what scholars have. In this sense, one might agree with Parks.

1.1.2 Parks, however, need not fear performative writing. It is at most a hairline fracture in the academic foundation, a fracture that has been noticeable for years as scholars have attempted to force the scientific paradigm to answer all their questions. Despite the fact that many have declared the logical positivist house in ruins, scholars continue to reside there. Despite the fact that many have shown how building structures with the mind only is flawed architecture, scholars continue to do so. The performative writing fracture may help all academic houses settle into greater alignment with human experience. Performative writing fixes the fracture by adding some design features; it welcomes the body into the mind's dwellings.

1.2. It is also useful to remember that formal argument based in and upon the methods of scientific inquiry is not the mode for discovering truths; it is, like all modes of inquiry, nothing more than a rhetorical style. Scholars need not be tied to the belief or practice that their scholarship must look a particular way, particularly a paradigmatic way that has its uses but has limited

> power in accounting for human experience. Instead, scholars might embrace another rhetorical style, what H. L. Goodall calls "mystery," "to encourage us to see and to define situations by their unique human and spiritual poetic, the interpenetrations of self, Other, and context, by our complexity and interdependence rather than by some simpler linear or causal logic" (Living in 125).

2. Performative writing features lived experience, telling, iconic moments that call forth the complexities of human life. With lived experience, there is no separation between mind and body, objective and subjective, cognitive and affective. Human experience does not reduce to numbers, to arguments, to abstractions. As poet Stephen Dunn notes, "Oh abstractions are just abstract // until they have an ache in them" (212). Performative writing attempts to keep the complexities of human experience in tack, to place the ache back in scholars' abstractions.

> 2.1 This is not to argue that experience equals scholarship. Performative writing does not indiscriminately record experience; it does not simply duplicate a cinema verite experiment. Instead, performative writing is a selective camera, aimed carefully to capture the most arresting angles. Each frame is studied and felt; each shot is significant. Much is left on the editing floor. Everyday experience, then, is not scholarship, but the shaping of everyday experience into telling and moving tales can be. The performative writer functions as Bert States suggests the artist does, as

"someone who says, 'This is the way people behave N number of times,' and knows how to put the N into expressive form" (19).

2.2 In this manner, performative writing makes its case, a case, to borrow from Walter Fisher's familiar argument, based in narrative plausibility and narrative fidelity. It is a case that is more interested in evoking than representing, in constructing a world than in positing this is the way the world is (e.g., Tyler; Ellis). It is a case that does not just rely upon its descriptive portrayal, no matter how precise or poignant, but also depends upon its ability to create experience. Stephen Tyler's assertion about post-modern ethnography holds for performative writing as well: "It is not a record of experience at all; it is the means of experience" (138). Thus, performative writing offers both an evocation of human experience and an enabling fiction. Its power is in its ability to tell the story of human experience, a story that can be trusted and a story that can be used. It opens the doors to a place where the raw and the genuine find their articulation through form, through poetic expression, through art.

3. Performative writing rests upon the belief that the world is not given, but constructed, composed of multiple realities. All representations of human experience are partial and partisan (e.g., Goodall; Phelan). At best, scholars might achieve, to use James Clifford's phrase, a "rigorous partiality" (25) and acknowledge, like all

"standpoint epistemologist"[2], that all our utterances are committed, positioned.

> 3.1 Performative writing resists arguments that attempt to prove all other explanations inadequate or suspect. Performative writers do not believe that the world is one particular way. They do not believe that argument is an opportunity to win, to impose their logic upon others, to colonize. They do not believe that there should be only one house on the hill. They do not believe that they can speak without speaking themselves, without carrying their own vested interests, their own personal histories, their own philosophical and theoretical assumptions forward. They do not believe that they can write without loss, without mourning (Phelan, Mourning).
>
> 3.2 Performative writing, then, takes as its goal to dwell within multiple perspectives, to celebrate an interplay of voices, to privilege dialogue over monologue. It cherishes the fragmentary, the uncertain. It marks the place that poet Tess Gallagher wishes to locate, the "point of all possibilities" where "time collapses, drawing in the past, present and future" (107).

4. Performative writing often evokes identification and empathic responses. It creates a space where others might see themselves. While often written in the first person, it presents what Trinh Minh-ha calls a "plural I," an "I" that has the potential to stand in for many "I's." It is an "I" that resonates, that resounds, that is familiar. Performative writing also often beckons empathy, allowing

others to not only see what the writer might see but also to feel what writer might feel. It is an invitation to take another's perspective.

> 4.1. Through identification and empathy, then, readers become implicated and human experience concretized. Readers may see more clearly how they and others constitute and are constituted by the world. They come to feel that they and others are written, given voice, a voice that they did not have prior to the reading. In this sense, the "I' of performative writing might best be seen as a geographical marker, a "here" rather than a "self." In short, the self becomes a positional possibility.[3]
>
> 4.2 When performative writing does not point beyond the writer, it may appear self-indulgent, narcissistic, self-serving or, to put it perhaps more kindly, therapeutic. This was one of the many attacks upon the Text and Performance Quarterly special issue on performative writing.[4] The argument was simply: If an article had such qualities, surely it isn't of any value. No one, however, seemed to question why one might object to the self being indulged, reflexive, served, or cured within scholarly work. On occasion, some noted the history of legitimating practices as if that were proof enough (i.e., it hasn't been allowed, therefore, it shouldn't be allowed) (e.g., Wendt).
>
> > 4.2.1. Yet, notions of self-indulgence, narcissism, self-serving, and therapeutic do seem to disturb, to rub against what scholars hope their research might

achieve. For such scholarship is not just about the self, although the self can never be left behind. Such scholarship, even when based upon the self, points outward. Its aim is to tell about human experience. It is for this reason that identification, that space of recognition and resonance, is often an essential aspect of performative writing.

4.2.2. Moreover, the self can be a place where tensions are felt and uncovered, a place of discovery, a place of power, of political action and resistance. One often knows what matters by recognizing what the body feels. This is in part the lesson phenomenologists have been trying to teach for years (e.g., Leder; Sheets-Johnson).

5. Performative writing turns the personal into the political and the political in the personal. It starts with the recognition that individual bodies provide a potent data base for understanding the political and that hegemonic systems write upon individual bodies. This is, of course, only to articulate what feminists have understood for years: the personal is political. It is to realize the potential in Walter Benjamin's insight, "To live in a glass house is a revolutionary virtue par excellence. It is also an intoxication, a moral exhibitionism, that we badly need" (228). Yet, too often research, even feminist and Marxist, does not call into play its own insights; it does not call upon individual experience to make its case. It does not work behind closed doors. It does not show how politics matter to individual lives

or how individual lives are evidence that social justice is absent. Performative writing insists upon making such connections.

6. Performative writing participates in relational and scholarly contexts. No writing occurs without context. In traditional work, the burden is to demonstrate how a particular argument advances current knowledge, a movement toward some all-encompassing explanation. The relationship between the writer and the reader is a distanced one, a relational positioning that demands that neither person become connected to the other. Performative writing, on the other hand, assumes that at given times certain questions are of interest, not because their answers might be another step toward some final explanation, but because of how they connect people within a scholarly community and locate them as individuals.

6.1. Some questions are productive to embrace because they participate in the ongoing concerns of a scholarly community. Performative writing, when done well, understands its place within disciplinary history. As it participates in that tradition, sometimes explicitly and sometimes implicitly, it hopes to provide "thick descriptions" (Geertz), "experiential particularity" (Baumeister and Newman), "deconstructive verisimilitude" (Denzin), "theatrical narrativity" (Crapanzano). Any piece of performative writing is a story among many but a story about issues that matter or can be made to matter to the community.

6.2 Some questions are productive to embrace because they connect individuals, not just as scholars, but as

> people who are willing place themselves at personal risk. By confessing, by exposing, and by witnessing, performative writers pursue their scholarly interests. In doing so, what might have remained hidden is made public, what might have stayed buried is put under examination, what might have been kept as personal commitment becomes public testimony. Such efforts often ask readers to respond, not just at the level of idea, but as one person who has become connected to another. Performative writers offer readers an interpersonal contract that they can elect to engage.

Part 2 finds its fitting end with the words of poet Philip Booth: "I strongly feel that every poem, every work of art, everything that is well done, well made, well said, genuinely given, adds to our chances of survival by making the world and our lives more habitable" (37). Performative writing participates in this spirit, in the hope that current research might become a place where all are welcome to reside and where all might come to recognize themselves in all their human complexity.

Part 3: Performative Writing: A Personal Anecdote

Having reached the end, this is a story of beginnings. It tells of places to go; it tells of reasons for going.

A colleague, saying she thought he would find it of interest, gave him copy of H. L. Goodall's Casing a Promised Land. He looked at it thinking that organizational communication isn't his area but was intrigued by the subtitle, The Autobiography of an Organizational Detective as Cultural Ethnographer. He read a few pages and it struck him: Scholarship could create the world it wants to examine, not as a list of abstractions or logical proofs, but as a vibrant presence. With his proverbial hand slapped against his face, he slowly moved toward this form, a form that did not for him at that time have a name but a form that held promise for the central question he was struggling with: How can we write about performance in our reviews and essays that evokes the spirit of performance? He knew that to call for an exact representation was a fool's folly but he wanted more than a record of what happened when. He wanted to be reminded of why we go see performances in the first place, that is, he wanted to encounter genuine rendering of human experience. What he is now most comfortable calling performative writing offered such a potential.

Since that time he has been writing essay after essay that tries to weave mythos with logos, to evoke rather than duplicate experience, to elicit feelings along with thought. He has had some success--a book and several articles published and numerous convention presentations--as he worked. But that is not why he continues, why he believes in what he is doing. He continues, he believes because this work garners response unlike any of his other work ever received.

With his more traditional work, he might have a colleague congratulate him on his latest publication, might hear that a piece he had written led to a good class discussion or might notice that his work was cited in someone else's essay. For the most part, though, his work seemed to disappear without comment, without any real impact that he could see. But with his performative writing, reactions seem quite different.

He remembers what happens when he takes his own and others performative writing to his graduate classes. He does so with some fear that to encourage new scholars to embrace performative writing is to place those scholars in some disciplinary jeopardy. Even so, after all the cautions he gives, after all the fears he tries to instill in those who might be drawn to the form, student after student wants to do performative writing. When he asks them why they are so attracted to such writing, they simply note that it allows them to say with more eloquence, feeling, and insight what they want to say about a given topic. They claim that they can enter the disciplinary conversation without the fear that they might not get it right by which they mean that speaking within the discipline does not have to come at the expense of someone else. He believes they are right.

He remembers conversations about his performative writing, conversations that suggested his pieces mattered. He thinks about the number of unsolicited comments from strangers who report being moved by what he had written or tell of how a piece made a difference in their life. He considers the classrooms where he heard his work is being used because "it seems to speak to students." He recalls those moments following convention presentations when

audience members felt the most appropriate response was a hug. He returns to those intimate exchanges with others that never would have happened had he not written what he did. He notes the many times listeners claim that he has spoken for them, that he has put into words what they could not articulate. He thinks of those listeners he has seen cry and those he has seen become angry. He knows that his performative writing places him in genuine dialogue with others, a personal and political dialogue that matters to him, to others, to the discipline and perhaps even to the world. He knows that his other work did not.

And so, this ending is a beginning, an invitation, a place to go.

Notes

1. My apologies to Marianne Moore derive from my shameful exploitation of her wonderful poem, "Poetry." For her version, see Collected Poems. New York: Macmillan, 1951, 40-41.

2. For an excellent discussion of "standpoint epistemologies" see Norman Denzin, Interpretive Ethnography. In the chapter entitled "standpoint epistemologies," he examines the assumptions of standpoint texts by focusing on the work of Patrica Hill Collins, Trinh T. Minh-ha, and Gloria Anzaldua.

3. Frederick Garber offers an informative discussion of how the self gets positioned in contemporary poetry, photography and performance art. His discussion of Steve McCaffery and McCaffery's own cited remarks are most in keeping with the argument identified here.

4. The infamous TPQ special issue (January 1997) produced a fury of CRTNET NEWS postings, convention programs and fodder, and several published responses.

Works Cited

Baumeister, R. F. and L. S. Newman. "How Stories Make Sense of Personal Experiences: Motives that Shape Autobiographical Narratives." Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin 20 (1994): 676-690.

Benjamin, Walter. One-Way Street and Other Writings. Trans. Edmund Jepcott and Kingsley Shorter. London: NLB, 1979.

Booth, Philip. "Philip Booth: An Interview by Rachel Berghash." American Poetry Review 18 (May/June 1989): 37-39.

Ellis, Carolyn. Final Negotiations: A Story of Love, Loss, and Chronic Illness. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1995.

Clifford, James. "Introduction: Partial Truths." Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography. Eds. James Clifford and George E. Marcus. Berkeley: U of California P, 1986. 1-26.

Crapanzano, Vincent. "Hermes Dilemma: The Making of Subversion in Ethnographic Description." Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography. Eds. James Clifford and George E. Marcus. Berkeley: U of California P, 1986. 51-76.

Denzin, Norman K. Interpretive Ethnography: Ethnographic Practices for the 21st Century. Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1997.

Dunn, Stephen. "Tenderness." New and Selected Poems 1974-1994. New York: W. W. Norton, 1994. 211-212.

Fisher, Walter R. Human Communication as Narration. Columbia: U of South Carolina P, 1987.

Gallagher, Tess. "The Poem as Time Machine." Claims for Poetry. Ed. Donald Hall. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1982. 104-116.

Garber, Frederick. Repositionings: Readings of Contemporary Poetry, Photography, and Performance Art. University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 1995.

Geertz, Clifford. Local Knowledge. New York: Basic Books, 1983.

Gingrich-Philbrook, Craig. "Disciplinary Violation: The Stigmatized Masculine Voice of Performance Studies." Communication Theory 8 (1998): 203-220.

Goodall, H. L., Jr. Casing a Promised Land: The Autobiography of an Organizational Detective as Cultural Ethnogrpher. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP,1989.

Goodall, H. L., Jr. Living in the Rock n Roll Mystery: Reading Context, Self, and Others as Clues. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1991.

Goodall, H. L., Jr. Divine Signs: Connecting Spirit to Community. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1996.

Leder, Drew. The Absent Body. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1990.

Parks, Malcolm R. "Where Does Scholarship Begin?" American Communication Journal 1 (1998): np (http://www.american comm.org/~aca/acj/acj.html)

Phelan, Peggy. Unmarked: The Politics of Performance. New York: Routledge, 1993.

Phelan, Peggy. Mourning Sex: Performing Public Memories. New York: Routledge, 1997.

Sheets-Johnstone, Maxine. The Roots of Thinking. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1990.

States, Bert O. "Performance as Metaphor." Theatre Journal 48 (1996): 1-26.

Trinh, Minh-ha T. When the Moon Waxes Red: Representation, Gender and Cultural Politics. New York: Routledge, 1991.

Tyler, Stephen A. "Post-Modern Ethnography: From Document of the Occult to Occult Document." Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography. Eds. James Clifford and George E. Marcus. Berkeley: U of California P, 1986. 122-40.

Wendt, Ted A. "The Ways and Means of Knowing: The 'Problem' of Scholarship in a Postmodern World." American Communication Journal 1 (1998): np (http://www.american.comm.org/~aca/acj/acj.html)